

SEA LETTER

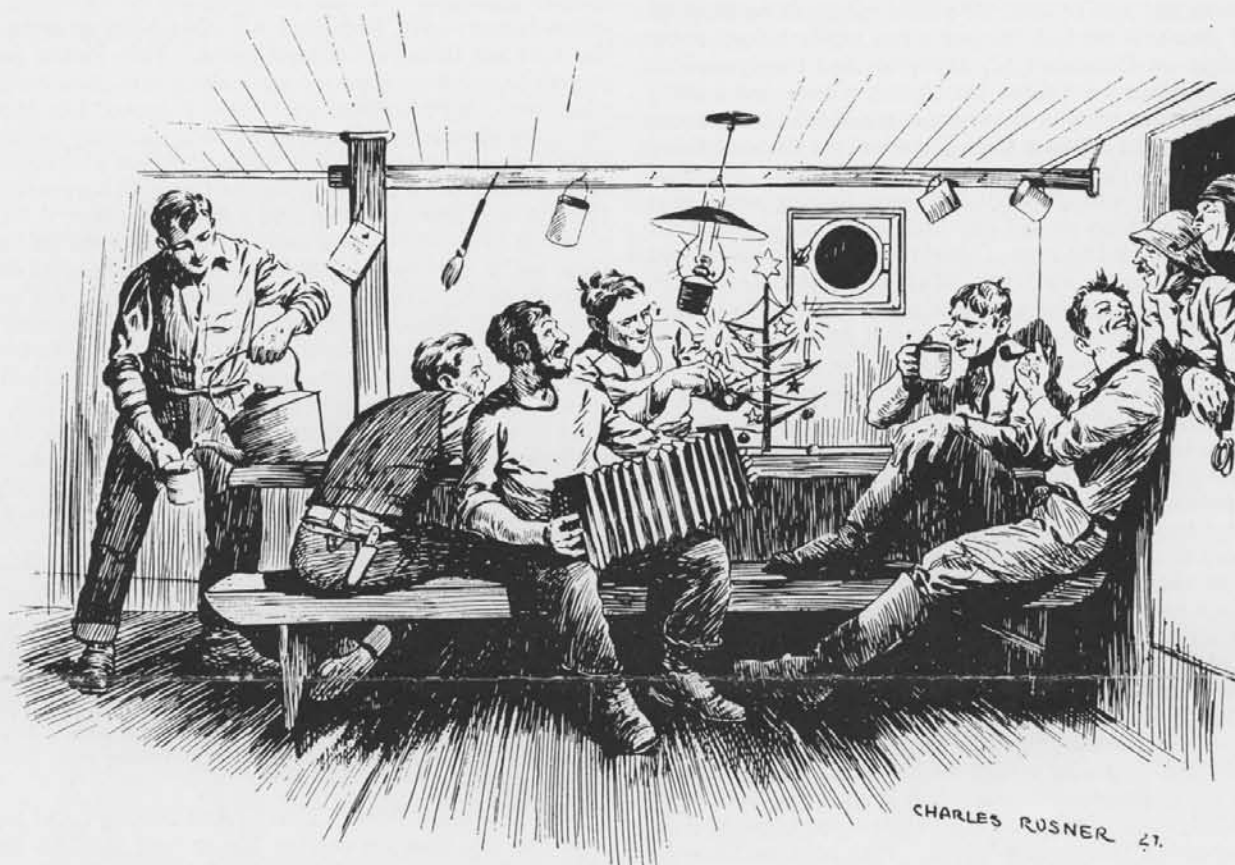
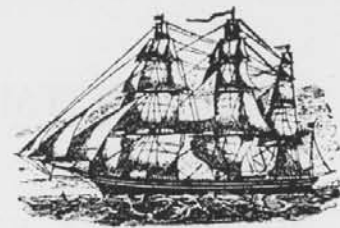
Published by the San Francisco Maritime Museum

ROBERT E. MAYER, President

KARL KORTUM, Director

Volume 2, No. 4, December 1964

ANITA VENTURA, Editor



A celebration in the fo'c'sle, drawing by Charles Rosner from Yachting magazine.

❧ A Collection for the Season ❧

Stories and gifts—with these SEA LETTER salutes the season. Recollection and review, they look to the past, distant and recent, as we turn to the New Year. Captain Fred Klebingat, author of "Christmas in the Fo'c'sle," served in 1916-1917 as first mate in the four-mast bark FALLS OF CLYDE. Master of Sail and Steam, Captain Klebingat is now chief technical advisor for the restoration project for the CLYDE in Honolulu. Gavin Craig of Liverpool, who was deckboy in the four-mast ship LANCING in 1921, writes a story of an experience at Christmas in a motor vessel off Cape Flattery. Lyle Galloway, whose drawings appear in Edith Hurd's *Sailers, Whalers and Steamers*, a children's history of West Coast shipping published this year by Lane, illustrates his story.

With this presentation we "wish you," as Annie Holmes Ricketson would have said. And did say, many times over, in her *Journal* of voyages on the whaleship

A. R. TUCKER, 1871-1874, published by the Old Dartmouth Historical Society. For Christmas Day, 1872: "This morning before I was up, the boy tip toed down the stairs and wished me. But I wished Mr. Harris and Mr. Vanderhoop. But the cook got a head of me. He looked down the sky light jest as I sat down to breakfast, and wished me. They all seemed very anxious to wish me first. . . . Saw Grampusses and fin back whales. . . ."

We also wish that you fare as well as did the men of BRITISH MERCHANT in 1891, according to a recollection of Captain Law Simms of Scarborough, England, published in G. V. Clark's magazine, *The South Spainer*: BRITISH MERCHANT had lost fore and main top-gallants in a bad squall after safely rounding the Horn one week before Christmas. The men celebrated the repair of the vessel and the holiday with "grog for the crew, a bottle of wine for the boys and a day of rest for all hands but the cook."—A. V.



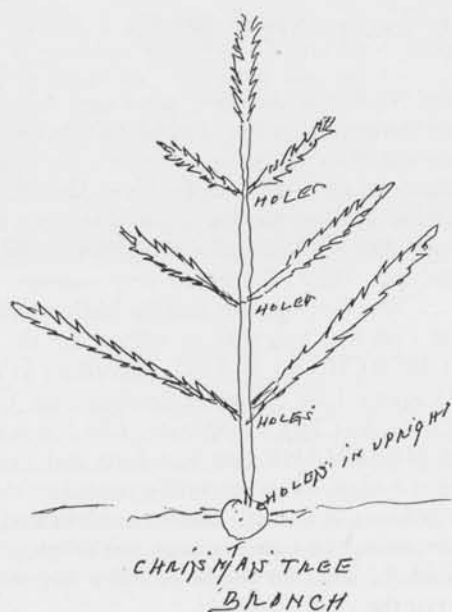
CHRISTMAS

in the FO'C'SLE

by Captain Fred K. Klebingat

"We ought to celebrate Christmas right, and make a Christmas tree," said Carl Schroeder, Top Dog and the oldest sailor of the port fo'c'sle. "We have plenty to be thankful for." And that we had, for just a few nights before, about midnight on December 17, 1906, we had barely escaped being wrecked on Tristan Da Cunha, a lone and solitary volcanic island planted just about in the middle of the South Atlantic Ocean between Cape Horn and the Cape of Good Hope. The night was dark and misty, and the four-mast bark ANNA, ex-OTTERBURN, was logging more than twelve knots with all sail set. And it was only due to the vigilance of the Old Man, Captain Koster, that we escaped shipwreck—by the width of a cat's whisker. It was a miracle, that is sure, and it was a miracle that all were able to celebrate this Christmas. In that surf and on that high rocky shore, not all of us could have reached the beach alive.

"And come here, Fred," said Carl, addressing himself to me. "You go and see 'Chips' and tell him that we want to make a Christmas tree. You are the only one who can get anything out of that old curmudgeon. See if you can talk him into loaning us some tools. . . ." Chips was more than willing; he also had caught the Christmas spirit. At once he went to work to make a first-class base, and he handed me a piece of pine about two inches square and about four feet long. "Take a hatchet," said he, "and taper this stick a little and plane it off." Next we picked a piece of straight-grained soft pine about a foot long. We split this up in fine pieces and now notched the edges of these slivers to resemble pine needles. By this time I had finished tapering the stick and smoothing it with a plane. Chips now took his carpenter's pencil from the pocket of his overalls. He marked the tapered stick for three sets of holes. "Here is an auger; bore some holes," he said. "Bore them at an angle—you know how the branches of a Christmas tree look." That done, he fitted the stick to the base he had made. The rest of the sailors were notching pine slivers with their sheath knives like this:



We managed to get hold of some green paint and thinned this out with turpentine and painted the branches. Now we assembled the tree. Chips cut a nice star out of an empty margarine can—this we mounted on top. Those days everyone was familiar with cutting chains out of paper; we did the same. We made neat little baskets out of the silver-covered wrappers of our tobacco packages. We had no nuts to insert in these, so we used iron ones. "We should hang some cookies on the tree, too," someone said. "I have it," another answered. "We can cut them out of this piece of yellow laundry soap. For sugar, we can pound up some of that rock salt from the salt meat barrel." They looked good enough to eat! Then someone came along with some cotton, which we draped on the tree so that it looked like snow. From the steward we managed to bum some big candles. They were not exactly the size we wanted, but we cut them up in chunks and seized them to the tree with wire seizing. The tree was now complete, and a fine tree it was, if I say so myself. The ANNA had two fo'c'sles under the fo'c'slehead, one to port (where I had my bunk), and one to starboard. After finishing the tree, we moved it into the starboard fo'c'sle, although this watch had no hand in making it.

Christmas Eve came. The ship was in the "roaring forties," racing before a light westerly gale with all sail set. She rolled heavily, and seas boarded her from port to starboard, at times filling the decks up to the rails. The man on the wheel was busily spinning the wheel trying to keep her before the racing seas. But in the starboard fo'c'sle all was snug. With the candles on the tree lit, "Merry Christmas," it was—but what to do about Christmas cheer?

"Let us go aft and wish the Old Man a Merry Christmas and invite him to have a look at our tree," Carl suggested. He did this; the ship had a fore and aft bridge, a cat walk, so one could get aft without any trouble. A short while later the Old Man and the mate appeared (we had no second mate). Both of them removed their caps as they stepped into the fo'c'sle. "A Merry Christmas to all and what a beautiful tree," the Old Man said. "The best I have ever seen." The mate agreed.

"And how about Santa Claus?" (And nobody could look more like him than the captain. His smiling face, his long whiskers, his generous girth and tall boots—all that was missing was the red suit.) "I notice that you have no refreshment," said the Captain. "I should have thought of that before—send a couple of the boys aft with buckets, and I'll see to it that you do."

The boys soon returned with buckets of rum punch, and they also brought a box of cigars. Now can you beat this Christmas in the middle of the South Atlantic—a fine, lit-up Christmas tree, a mug of the skipper's famous rum punch and the smoke of a fine Havana! Too bad the man on the wheel could not join us, but he would be relieved as soon as his wheel turn was up. And there was also the man on the lookout, but he sneaked down from the fo'c'slehead now and then to fill his mug and take another drag at the Old Man's Christmas cigar. It was a "Merry Christmas and Good Will to All Men."

A day or so after Christmas, one of the men on the starboard watch was lying in his bunk on his watch below. The more he looked at the tree and those cookies, the more he wanted to have one. Being in the starboard watch, he didn't know that we had cut them out of laundry soap and sprinkled them with rock salt "sugar." "They won't miss one," he thought. He looked about; his shipmates seemed to be sound asleep. He untied a "cookie" and stuffed it into his mouth—then what a reaction! He choked and sputtered and spat and spat and jumped out of his bunk and rushed for the fresh-

water bucket and cursed and swore, and what he had to say about the port watch was no one else's business, and the names he called them are not printed in any dictionary. A good laugh was had by all at this outcome of our Christmas party! And the rest of the cookies hung on the tree until well into the New Year.

This had been a perfect Christmas—A Christmas at Sea.

From DOOR-TO-DOOR at Christmas

by Gavin Craig

The flashing light on Cape Flattery receded into the gloom astern as the heavy-laden motorship met the swell of the North Pacific Ocean. The scending of her steel bows drove white water to either side on the downward plunge and brought a hissing, streaming turmoil close alongside on the upward swing. A cold, thin easterly rain washed the superstructure and decks.

A three-island type British dry-cargo vessel of 9,500 dead-weight tons, registered in Liverpool, the ship had loaded in British Columbian ports and was outward bound for Shanghai with a full cargo of board lumber, including a deckload ten feet high.

In the 1930s freights were hard to get and the rates were low, ships were laid up by the thousands, and every man aboard this vessel, from the Master on down, knew that he was lucky to be employed at all.

Christmas was but a week away—two thousand miles ahead, if maximum speed could be maintained, which was doubtful on this run. I, who was serving as an Able Seaman, had traveled this road before in other ships and had no illusions about what lay ahead.

As the ship reached farther north on what I suspected was a rather risky course for the time of year, the weather became colder.

The Carpenter had constructed a ladder leading from the top of the deckload down to the entrance of the fo'c'sle alleyway, and he was now building a door, designed to keep out the seas. We stood around, watched and criticized. "That thing wouldn't keep a draft out—why, its only an inch-and-a-half thick," and so on.

Soon bad weather was upon us, with heavy seas, high wind and snow flurries. The ship plunged and rolled onwards, decks awash and a cold grey sea wherever one looked. Down in the fo'c'sle, conditions were not too good, owing to lack of ventilation. And when the bows drove down and a big sea swept overhead, one could hear the whistle of compressed air as the narrow well across the ship, between the break of the fo'c'sle head and the fore part of the deck cargo, filled up. That's where the crews toilets were.

Christmas Eve—I came off watch at midnight, and we wished each other a Happy Christmas, drank our coffee, had a cigarette and turned in, hoping for one good dinner and no work for the rest of the twenty-four hours.

I turned in, but soon felt the need to go outside. Stepping into the alleyway, I closed the fo'c'sle door, then waited for the ship to slow down her wild gyrations before I ventured outside. As I reached the door, the bows rose swiftly, and I knew she was about to take a big sea aboard. I waited. Down went the bow; down, down, down, and there was a thunderous crash overhead and roar of water as the well filled up. The ship staggered and vibrated.

My eyes were on the outside door, and though it only lasted a second or two, every detail seemed to happen in slow motion. I saw the water hose into the alleyway round the edges of the door and frame, then the door itself bending inward like a rubber curtain. Then it shot toward me edgewise, engulfed in a wall of solid water.

I managed to grab and hold the steel rod leading from the switchbox on the bulkhead to the windlass above. Floating horizontally, I was sucked, twisted and banged around, inches away from the solitary deckhead lamp. The flying door had stove in the new flimsy door of the forepeak, but as the water poured into the peak and receded from around me, I sensed the ship's bows lifting higher again and realized that when the two smashed doors rushed out of the forepeak, they would take me with them and over the side.

Reaching down, I twisted the ring of the fo'c'sle door handle and pushed, but three or four seamen inside were pushing against it. Putting my shoulder to the door and my feet against the opposite bulkhead as the water streamed past at waist level, I exerted every ounce of strength and weight, and the door slowly gave way as another big sea crashed down overhead and came thundering into the alleyway.

I entered the fo'c'sle with it, and we all clung to bunks and stanchions as the water found its level in the lower bunks. We heard the engine room telegraph bells—it became less noisy as the speed was reduced. A faint voice called from outside—it was the standby man, with information: "Arf the bleeding deckload's gone over the wall—yer to come on deck." We all went.



The load over No. 2 hatch was like a shelled forest, splintered and wound round with chains and wires. It sloped down to the port rail and about four standards of it were overside, still attached to the ship, afloat on a lee roll and shedding water when she rolled to windward. All the lower bridge rail had gone.

We rigged clusters of lights, cleared a winch of lumber, rigged a derrick and passed wires round the load overside and tried to heave it back aboard, parbuckling it, but it was impossible. About midday we freed it, and it floated off to leeward, breaking up. Slipping on ice, sweating amid the snow, sliding and cursing the splinters and the jammed fingers and feet, we restowed the remainder of the deckload, transferring part of the cargo from over No. 1 hatch, so that the whole was level again. Two men at a time, we gulped down hurriedly our Christmas dinners in the galley where—it was hard to believe!—they had been kept hot and safe.

And so the day wore on, and along towards midnight we had finished splicing old mooring wires and rigging them as preventer lashings. The Captain was satisfied, and the vessel resumed her course.